Piazzas, Basilicas, and "sky soldiers" start to paint the picture of the new Vicenza High School in the Italian town of Vicenza. The site of the new school, Villagio della Pace, meaning "Village of Peace," is a gated housing community for U.S. "Sky Soldiers" of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team and their dependents. As part of the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) master plan, the new school will be placed
alongside the recently built middle and elementary schools.

Parkhill's task from DoDEA is to design schools to meet forward-thinking learning objectives to include innovation in education, curriculum delivery, the use of technology, and the requirements for sustainability and energy conservation. DoDEA requires schools of the future to be flexible and adaptable, allowing adjustments to new and innovative ways to deliver instruction and meet the needs of all students.

Acknowledging the significance of local Palladian architectural buildings, the high school’s basic tripartite front massing borrows from Palladio’s Loggia Del Capitaniato located across from the Basilica in Vicenza’s City Center. For budget and constructability reasons, ornamentation has been limited. Stone-colored rectangular pilasters form a portico across the building’s main entrance. Echoing Palladio’s tripartite elevation of the Loggia, a smaller tripartite stone-hued accent breaks the front elevation’s yellow stucco as an accented entry piece.

To meet both the client goals and their education specifications, this project team will create a two-level, 114,000-square-foot high school to provide educational and athletic facilities for a 9th through 12th grade population of 354 students. In keeping with local design principles, the primary entrance provides a piazza style gathering space with seating and landscaping that connects the high school physically and architecturally to the existing elementary and middle schools. The designers achieved this by creating a two-story central element that steps down to one story on both ends of the front academic/administrative wing. The high school’s front façade aligns in design with the adjacent middle school to reinforce a cohesive master-planned appearance of a campus of multiple buildings.
The character of the high school is planned to contextually fit with the other buildings on the campus. However, being a high school, this structure also needed its own identity. Working with the requirements of the 21st century education specifications, roof plazas for outdoor learning activities are planned, reducing the building’s apparent mass.

For shading of the roof plazas, pergolas constructed of columns and a latticed shade trellis are planned. All other building elevations follow the front façade with respect to eave heights, material colors and horizontal mold bands.

Students, parents, educators, administrators, and various client specialists were part of the 116-person building committee that came together early in the design process to help decide what would work best for their new community high school.
The committee quickly recognized the commons as the “heart of the school” and made significant efforts to organize the learning neighborhoods, info center, gymnasium and the performance space around the commons.

Students will have five learning neighborhoods, including one Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) area. Each learning neighborhood surrounds a collaboration space with classrooms, a teacher collaboration area, restrooms and conference rooms.
Galileo, Maria Montessori, Palladio and Leonardo Da Vinci were just the starting point. In looking through potential imagery, a local Italian architect offered “of course we should highlight inspirational Italian achievements, but since this is a school for the children of U.S. ‘Sky Soldiers,’ can we also find a way to connect them to inspirational U.S. achievements? As an example, Renaissance Italian artist Sandro Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus” inspired American pop artist Andy Warhol’s “Birth of Venus” screen print. Two artists from different periods of time and in different parts of the world found a similar inspiration to help them voice their unique point of views. A stunning similarity in a world of differences emerged.

Among the other inspirations: Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson; Rita Levi-Montalcini, 1986 Nobel Prize winner for discovery of the nerve growth factor; Leonardo Fibonacci, considered “the most talented Western
mathematician of the Middle Ages”; Katherine Johnson, a mathematician whose calculations were essential to the success of the first and subsequent U.S. manned spaceflights; Miuccia Prada, co-CFO and head designer of Prada; Designer Vera Wang, one of America's most prominent fashion designers; Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple and Chairman of Pixar; Frederick Douglass, an eloquent national leader of the abolitionist movement; and Italo Calvino, the most translated contemporary Italian writer ever.

Once this concept was revealed, it was not long before the building committee started brainstorming what would become an extensive package of exciting learning opportunities throughout every space of the school.

From digitized art of Italian composers music playing on screens outside the music rooms to a mural of incredibly diverse Italian and American scientists, mathematicians, artists and inventors, the school’s curriculum is written on the walls.

Teens may want to learn Italian or how the metric system works compared to the imperial system. They can start with wayfinding signage throughout the building since it is in both metric/feet and Italian/English.
Furthermore, poetry and quotes by both inspirational Italians and Americans can be seen throughout the neighborhoods and common spaces. These are some of the quotations that were under consideration.

To spark an interest in learning about Italian materials and methods of construction, every material and design approach have been briefly explained on wall plaques. The plaques also highlight the person behind the work, such as the interior designer who helped select the Terrazzo flooring (a classical Italian approach to flooring) on which the student is standing or the plaster walls. This plaque speaks to the engineering of the school.
Having wall elements that “teach” was part of an effort to offer opportunities for students to relate to a person or a potential career such as the structural engineer who designs concrete columns or the electrical engineer who designs a proper lighting system. Every effort was made to engage the building user with a potential learning opportunity.
A piazza-like gathering space, state-of-the-art gym and inspiring wall art help draw about 350 students to the new school.

The design of Vicenza High School celebrates the learning opportunities of U.S. students living in the culturally rich Italian environment. The new school is on track to be LEED Certified and is scheduled to open in August of 2022.